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AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SEOUL 14210

TERREP

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: PREL, PTER, PGOV, KN, KS, KOLY
SUBJECT: UNIFICATION MINISTRY OFFICIAL COMMENTS ON KAL
CRASH AND NORTH KOREA

1. C - ENTIRE TEXT.

2. SUMMARY: IN A DECEMBER 4 DISCUSSION WITH POLOFF, UNIFICATION MINISTRY DIRGEN SONG SAID HIS ANALYSTS STRONGLY SUSPECT DPRK INVOLVEMENT IN THE KAL DISASTER BUT

ARE AT A LOSS TO EXPLAIN ITS MOTIVES, PARTICULARLY SINCE THE INCIDENT SEEMS TO WORK IN FAVOR OF THE ROK RULING PARTY WHICH IT PRESUMABLY WANTS TO LOSE THE UPCOMING ELECTION. HE THOUGHT THE OLYMPICS DISRUPTION THEORY HAS

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEW AUTHORITY: SAMUEL V SMITH
DATE/CASE ID: 05 AUG 2009 200807065

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SOME PLAUSIBILITY BUT RAISES THE QUESTION WHY THE NORTH WOULD UNDERTAKE SUCH A HIGH-RISK TERRORIST OPERATION SO LONG BEFORE THE GAMES. SONG WENT ON TO DOWNPLAY THE EFFECT OF THE INCIDENT ON THE OUTCOME OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION HERE AND ON SOUTH-NORTH RELATIONS, ASSERTING THAT THE ROKG'S POSTURE TOWARD THE NORTH WILL DEPEND ON PUBLIC REACTIONS HERE AND THAT NO POLICY DECISIONS HAVE YET BEEN MADE. HE DID NOT MENTION THE POSSIBILITY OF ROK RETALIATION WHICH WE UNDERSTAND FROM OTHERS, INCLUDING ROK MILITARY OFFICERS, IS AN OPTION NOT UNDER CONSIDERATION. END SUMMARY.

3. IN A DECEMBER 4 DISCUSSION, OFFICE OF SOUTH-NORTH DIALOGUE DIRGEN SONG HAN HO TOLD POLOFF THAT THE UNIFICATION MINISTRY "STRONGLY SUSPECTS" NORTH KOREA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE DESTRUCTION OF KAL 858 BUT IS "BAFFLED" BY ITS MOTIVES. HE NOTED THAT THE PREVAILING ROKG VIEW -- THAT PYONGYANG STAGED THE INCIDENT TO DISRUPT THE UPCOMING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND NEXT YEAR'S SEOUL OLYMPICS -- RAISES THE QUESTION WHY IT WOULD CARRY OUT AN ACTION WHICH SO OBVIOUSLY BENEFITS RULING PARTY CANDIDATE ROH TAE WOO. HE SAID MINISTRY ANALYSTS HAVE SO FAR BEEN UNABLE TO COME UP WITH A PLAUSIBLE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION OR TO WHY IT SHOULD HAVE RESORTED TO HIGH-RISK OLYMPICS TERRORISM SO EARLY.

4. PURSUING THE POSSIBILITY OF NORTH KOREAN RESPONSIBILITY, SONG REACTED SKEPTICALLY TO HYPOTHETICAL MOTIVES CANVASSED BY POLOFF -- THAT IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN A

"ROGUE" OPERATION NOT APPROVED BY THE LEADERSHIP; THAT PYONGYANG MIGHT SEEK TO ENSURE ROH'S VICTORY IN HOPES THAT IT WILL LEAD TO POLITICAL CHAOS HERE; AND THAT IT MIGHT ALREADY HAVE WRITTEN OFF FURTHER OLYMPIC NEGOTIATIONS AND NO LONGER CARE ABOUT INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS TO TERRORIST ACTS DESIGNED TO SCARE OFF POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS -- NOTING THAT THERE IS NO EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT ANY OF THESE CONJECTURES.

5. IN RESPONSE TO POLOFF'S QUERY, HE SAID HIS MINISTRY HAS DETECTED NO RECENT CHANGES IN PYONGYANG'S LEADERSHIP OR PROPAGANDA WHICH MIGHT HELP ACCOUNT FOR ITS RESORT TO INDISCRIMINATE SLAUGHTER OF ROK CIVILIANS. SETTING ASIDE THE STILL UNSOLVED BOMBING OF KIMPO AIRPORT JUST BEFORE THE 1986 SEOUL ASIAN GAMES, HE SAID PYONGYANG HAS IN THE

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PAST GENERALLY ESCHEWED SUCH ACTIVITY IN FAVOR OF KIDNAPPINGS AND POLITICAL ASSASSINATIONS SUCH AS THE OCTOBER 1983 RANGOON BOMBING. HE ADDED THAT THE RANDOM MURDER OF SOUTH KOREAN CIVILIANS BY DPRK GUERRILLA SQUADS IN 1968 NEVERTHELESS SUGGESTS THAT IT MIGHT STILL BE WITHIN THE PARAMETERS OF WHAT THE NORTH CONSIDERS "ACCEPTABLE" MEANS TO SOW PANIC AND DEMORALIZATION.

6. TURNING TO THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL IMPACT, SONG ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE GOVERNMENT AND RULING PARTY ARE SEEKING TO EXPLOIT THE INCIDENT BY PLEDGING AN ENHANCED NATIONAL SECURITY POSTURE AND ACCUSING OPPOSITION CANDIDATES KIM YOUNG SAM AND KIM DAE JUNG OF DOWNPLAYING THE NORTH KOREAN THREAT. (ROH MADE THIS CHARGE AT DECEMBER 2 CAMPAIGN RALLY, PROMPTING WARNINGS FROM THE TWO KIMS ON THE FOLLOWING DAY NOT TO TRY TO USE THE TRAGEDY FOR PARTISAN POLITICAL PURPOSES.) NOTING THAT THE ROK ELECTORATE IS ACCUSTOMED TO SUCH TACTICS, HOWEVER, HE PREDICTED THAT THEY WOULD HAVE LITTLE INFLUENCE ON THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTION.

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7. SONG AGREED THAT THE INCIDENT IS LIKELY TO DISCOURAGE ROKG FLEXIBILITY TOWARD THE NORTH, PARTICULARLY IF THE LATTER'S RESPONSIBILITY WERE TO BE PROVEN BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT. HE ASSERTED, HOWEVER, THAT THE ROKG'S POSITION WILL DEPEND ON ITS READING OF THE PUBLIC MOOD AND NO POLICY DECISIONS HAVE YET BEEN MADE. HE DESCRIBED AS A "PERSONAL VIEW ONLY" KOREAN OLYMPIC COMMITTEE HEAD KIM

CHONG HA'S DECEMBER 3 STATEMENT TO THE EFFECT THAT THE ROK MIGHT "NOT CONTINUE THE OLYMPIC TALKS". (KIM LEFT THE DOOR OPEN TO NORTH KOREAN PARTICIPATION IN THE OLYMPICS BY INDICATING THAT THIS WOULD BE UP TO THE IOC TO DECIDE.) SONG FURTHER CLAIMED THAT THE ADVERSE IMPACT OF THE INCIDENT ON SOUTH-NORTH RELATIONS IS LIKELY TO BE TEMPORARY, AND THAT HE EXPECTS THE NEW GOVERNMENT WHICH TAKES OVER NEXT FEBRUARY WILL NOT BE DETERRED FROM UNDERTAKING INITIATIVES TOWARD PYONGYANG. HE REPLIED IN THE NEGATIVE TO POLOFF'S QUERY WHETHER A RANGOON-STYLE APOLOGY MIGHT BE DEMANDED.

8. COMMENT: SONG'S PUZZLEMENT AND CAUTION ABOUT ATTRIBUTING RESPONSIBILITY TO THE NORTH ARE ECHOED BY OTHER ROKG OFFICIALS WORKING SOUTH-NORTH ISSUES. WE NOTE IN THIS CONTEXT THAT HE DID NOT RAISE THE POSSIBILITY OF ROK RETALIATION. OTHERS, INCLUDING ROK MILITARY OFFICERS, HAVE ASSURED US THAT THIS IS NOT ON OPTION UNDER CONSIDERATION IF ONLY BECAUSE IT WOULD JEOPARDIZE THE STABILITY DEEMED NECESSARY HERE FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE ELECTION AND OLYMPICS.

9. MOSCOW AND BAGDHAD MINIMIZE CONSIDERED. LILLEY##